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ABSTRACT

The career preparedness component of British Columbia's Career and Personal Planning (CAPP) curriculum commits two fundamental category mistakes in its classification of employability skills, both with potentially serious consequences for education. The first type of category mistake is incorrectly conflating distinct categories of concepts under the general rubric of generic skills and, thereby, disregarding the contextual understanding, background knowledge, and epistemic attitudes required to achieve certain desired cognitive competencies. Concepts describing mental process such as understanding, problem solving, and critical thinking are applied in the same logical fashion as those denoting physical operations. Their evaluation in the prescribed fashion presents insurmountable difficulties for teachers since mental process concepts are inseparable from the context in which they are used. CAPP makes available no pedagogical approaches that include a context for and adequate background knowledge of the problem to be solved; adequate content knowledge of the subject being communicated and the context in which the communicative act occurs; or facts relevant to the matter being critiqued. The second type of category mistake committed by CAPP is including values and attitudes under the rubric of generic employability skills and, in so doing, obscuring important ethical distinctions between the contentious area of values education and basic skills instruction. (Contains 14 references.) (YLB)

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Running head: CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF CAPP

The Employability Skills Discourse:

A Conceptual Analysis of the Career and Personal Planning Curriculum

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The current focus on employability skills in Canadian public schooling raises a number of important conceptual questions regarding this instructional approach to vocational education. In British Columbia, the Career and Personal Planning (CAPP) curriculum, introduced into secondary schools in 1995, reflects the growing trend toward skills education as a way to enhance the occupational relevance of schools. The *career preparedness* component of CAPP commits two fundamental category mistakes in its classification of employability skills both with potentially serious consequences for education. First, by incorrectly conflating distinct categories of concepts under the general rubric of generic skills, the contextual understanding, background knowledge, and epistemic attitudes required to achieve certain desired cognitive competencies are disregarded. Secondly, CAPP categorizes attitudes, values and dispositions as skills and, in so doing, obscures important ethical distinctions between the contentious area of values education, and basic skills instruction. By employing examples from both CAPP and the Conference Board of Canada's *Employability Skills Profile* (ESP), a mandatory supplement to the former program, I will reveal how these category mistakes may prevent students from achieving program objectives, and circumvent important moral issues concerning the conveyance of values and attitudes to students.

Simply explained, a category mistake is the classification error committed when a concept, for whatever reason, is placed in the improper category. Many category mistakes reflect more than simple errors in concept taxonomy, however, revealing instead fundamental misunderstandings in the qualities or characteristics of the concepts themselves. Indeed, a common consequence of category mistakes, and one frequently reflected in CAPP, is attributing some property to a concept that it simply cannot possess. According to Ryle (1949), category mistakes result from employing certain linguistic concepts in improper logical fashion. To illuminate through one of Ryle's own examples, placing the activity of exhibiting team spirit in the same category with the baseball skills of pitching, batting and catching is to commit a category mistake. Team spirit is not an isolated skill like pitching

or batting that can be strengthened and improved by practicing a particular set of physical operations. Rather, the concept of team spirit describes the collective emotional disposition of the players performing those activities. Many of the category mistakes that occur in employability skills discourse are directly traceable to the improper logical mapping of linguistic concepts identified by Ryle.

Although there are other philosophers he could have singled out, Ryle chooses Descartes and his theory of psycho-physical dualism as the primary source of mental process category mistakes. Psycho-physical dualism suggests that a person is comprised of two distinct substances: a mind composed of a non-extended ethereal substance; and a material or physical body. According to Cartesian dualism, then, human beings consist of two fundamentally distinct substances; they are essentially non-material ghosts ensconced in physical machines. There are other possible objections to the theory, i.e., explaining the required interaction between extended and non-extended substances, but Ryle's critique is based on an analysis of language, and highlighting the logical mapping errors that emerge from Cartesian dualism:

> Now the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine does just this. It maintains that there exists both minds and bodies; that there occur physical processes and mental processes; . . . I am not denying that there occur mental processes . . . But I am saying that the phrase 'there occur mental processes' does not mean the same sort of thing as 'there occur physical processes', and, therefore, that it makes no sense to conjoin or disjoin the two (Ryle, p.22).

Thus, our conceptual confusion begins with accepting Descartes' description of a person as comprised of mind and body, and then assimilating statements about mental processes to the same logical category as statements about physical processes.

Since linguistic concepts are used to describe a wide range of physical activities such as walking, running, writing, carving, etc., psycho-physical dualism suggests the need for a counterpart set of idioms to describe mental activities such as understanding, imagining, problem-solving and

thinking. In employability skills discourse, for example, linguistic concepts describing mental processes are grammatically situated as if they belong to the same logical category as physical operations or skills when, as Ryle points out, the concepts of understanding and dribbling a basketball represent distinct logical categories. As a simple matter of logic, the concept of understanding must be contextualized in the form of 'understanding *x*' when employed in language. Clearly, it is not a logically or conceptually isolatable skill that can be strengthened through practice like dribbling a basketball.

Ryle's analysis of mental process category mistakes also highlights the conceptual errors that follow from a persistent reluctance in some circles to relinquish the semantic comfort furnished by the direct reference theory of language (Park, 1994). The direct reference theory holds that every word is a kind of linguistic label that corresponds to some entity, a view often leading to profound ontological confusion. In spite of contemporary semantic knowledge, there remains a tendency in educational discourse to assume language functions in referential fashion. Indeed, there appears a prevailing predisposition to believe that because some idiom exists, i.e., critical or creative thinking, there must also exist a corresponding mental process to which the term refers. Numerous assessment practices seeking to measure student proficiency in creative thinking in a context free manner, for example, indicate some educators cling dogmatically to the belief that the concept actually denotes an identifiable mental process (Bailin, 1994). Attempting to alleviate the ontological confusion generated by this view, Ryle stresses the non-referential aspect of mental process concepts, arguing the actual meaning of these terms is discovered by examining their use in ordinary language, a theme Wittgenstein (1967) later pursues in *Philosophical Investigations*.

Category mistakes occur within employability skills discourse, then, when concepts describing mental processes such as understanding, problem-solving, and critical thinking are applied in the same logical fashion as those denoting physical operations. After students complete the *work*

experience component of CAPP in grades 11 and 12, for example, teachers are expected to assess whether the former have acquired effective communication, problem-solving and decision-making skills, presumably in the same fashion they would assess basic academic skills such as reading or writing. Evaluation of these competencies in the prescribed fashion presents insurmountable difficulties for CAPP teachers, however, since mental process concepts are logically inseparable from the context in which they are employed. In the absence of a particular subject matter and context, there is no possible set of procedures to adequately assess the so-called "skills" of communicating, problem-solving and decision-making.

Barrow (1987) points out that the concept of a skill is incorrectly applied in educational discourse to categorize a disparate range of qualities, abilities and dispositions that include perceptual, social, critical and interpersonal characteristics. He argues that the concept of a skill normally refers to physical or manual abilities whose development is typically accomplished by practicing a prescribed set of physical operations. The concept of a skill, then, appears most appropriately suited to describe manual or physical proficiencies such as dribbling basketballs, turning somersaults or any other number of psycho-motor activities strengthened by practice and exercise. If I practice dribbling a basketball for ten minutes every day, and possess at least a modicum of athletic ability, my dribbling skills are apt to improve regardless of the context in which they are employed. Committing the logical error identified by Ryle, the grammatical structure of the employability skills discourse fallaciously implies that cognitive competencies can be similarly practiced and perfected in a limited number of contexts for subsequent widespread application.

The relevant pedagogical upshot of category mistakes is that procedures and practices designed to enhance physical skills are apt to be ill-suited to impart desired cognitive competencies in students. The failure to appreciate important conceptual distinctions between physical skills and cognitive competencies adversely affects employability skills education by neglecting necessary

conditions for the latter's achievement. Superior understanding of a particular subject matter cannot be achieved through repeated, contextually-isolated, acts of understanding. Similarly, there is no pedagogical approach to enhance problem-solving "skills" without including a context for, and adequate background knowledge of, the particular problem to be solved. Rather than teaching problem-solving as a generic transferable skill, then, students would be better served if taught to appreciate the importance of content knowledge when seeking effective solutions to the difficulties they confront. Within the employability skills program, however, the importance of background knowledge as a necessary condition for effective problem-solving appears entirely absent. Instead, these programs typically suggest that because knowledge is expanding at an accelerated rate and workplace change is inevitable, teaching generic transferable skills provides a superior pedagogy than conveying content knowledge to students (Ross, 1994).

Not only do employability skills programs generally neglect the importance of content knowledge in achieving certain cognitive competencies, concepts such as critical thinking and communicating are discussed as though their performance was entirely independent of context. A prescribed learning outcome in CAPP states: "It is expected that students will practice and demonstrate effective communication skills" (p.114). Similar to understanding, communicating cannot be logically separated from context because it necessarily involves communicating some specific subject matter. Teaching students a certain set of physical operations such as eye contact, good posture, keeping one's hands away from the mouth, etc. might be fostered in students as communication skills, but these actions in themselves fail to provide a sufficient condition for effective communication (Barrow, 1990). Within certain cultures or contexts, displaying these behaviours might provide a necessary condition for effective communication while in others they will be simply considered acts of aggression or rudeness. Effective communication requires adequate content knowledge of the subject being communicated, and some appreciation for the context or

culture in which the communicative act occurs.

A lack of appreciation for the necessary role played by context and content knowledge in achieving certain cognitive competencies is also reflected in the problematic concept of skill transferability. Throughout the CAPP curriculum students are expected to "demonstrate an understanding of transferable employability skills" (p.143). Indeed, the major assumption supporting the instruction of generic employability skills is their supposed application in various occupational contexts. In a labour market where long term employment security has largely vanished, and on-going technological development continues to effect workplace change, the generic quality of employability skills is their most attractive hypothesized quality. The view that such skills as critical thinking, communicating and problem-solving are easily transferable between occupational contexts, however, results from the same conceptual confusion that categorizes them as isolatable skills. Possessing the ability to resolve a technical crisis at a nuclear powered generating station reveals no unique ability or special insight that allows the same person to modify surgical objectives after discovering some underlying pathology during neurosurgery. Problem-solving in various occupations obviously requires rather precise knowledge about procedures, policies, processes and consequences specific to the occupation in question.

Perhaps the most overworked and misunderstood of all the employability skills contained in CAPP, and elsewhere throughout the employability skills discourse, is that of critical thinking. Critical thinking is portrayed in employability skills programs as a "silver bullet" that mysteriously enhances student success within market economy culture. As Lankshear (1997) suggests, "developing critical thinking skills throughout the work force is often touted as an answer to sluggish economic performance", and developing a "critical" approach to learning now fulfills the same rhetorical purpose in education as "democracy" and "freedom" (p.40-41). In the absence of any provided context, CAPP students are expected to think critically to evaluate situations, solve

problems and make decisions. Barrow (1987) criticizes such context free applications of critical thinking, arguing they appear predicated on fallacious faculty psychology assumptions, i.e., the view that cognitive operations, in a manner similar to physical ones, can be strengthened through practice and exercise:

> Whatever they might say if pressed on the point, educators talk as if, and they proceed as if, critical thinking were a skill like dribbling a ball, albeit more complex, and could be trained or developed in the same kind of way — namely, by practice in the activity itself. Certainly, if something other than the idea that the mind and emotions can be exercised, and capacities developed, analogously to the exercise and development of physical skills, is presupposed by typical curriculum injunctions to develop emotional, interpersonal and intellectual skills, it remains unclear what that something is" (p.191).

A meta-cognitive approach designed to foster critical thinking skills in students seemingly confirms Barrow's concern that faculty psychology tenets remain a contemporary pedagogical force. In stage one of a method proposed by Wilen and Phillips (1995), teachers are instructed to "introduce the skill, show examples and non-examples, and use exercises to practice the skill" (p.136). Besides neglecting the fundamental importance of background knowledge, such approaches fail to develop in students the necessary epistemic attitudes crucial to critical thinking. Students will not think critically about any subject matter if they lack the disposition to do so, and neglecting discussion of the intellectual virtues that encourage inquiry undermines the important role played by epistemic attitudes in promoting critical reflection (Ross, 1994).

Although an historian possessing adequate background knowledge may critically reflect on the causes of the French Revolution, there is no obvious reason to expect the same individual to think critically about the theoretical existence of neutrinos in the field of nuclear physics. It is a necessary condition of critical thinking to possess adequate background knowledge of the subject on which one is reflecting. Case and Wright (1997) explain:

> The most obvious and basic "tool" for critical thinking is background knowledge. Students cannot think critically about a topic if they know nothing about it. In fact, expecting students to speculate on matters about which they know very little may have the undesirable consequence of encouraging ill-informed conclusions (p.15).

As Case and Wright suggest, students ignorant of facts relevant to the matter being critiqued will be unable either to construct or detect sound arguments on that particular subject. If students are expected to think critically, they must be first provided with relevant content knowledge, and be introduced to effective analytical procedures specific to the various disciplines of inquiry. In the final analysis, the ability to think critically in an effective, meaningful sense simply cannot be developed in the context free, transferable fashion suggested by ESP and CAPP.

The second type of category mistake committed by CAPP with potentially serious educational fallout is including values and attitudes under the rubric of generic employability skills. Classifying attitudes and values as skills obscures important differences between them; fundamental conceptual distinctions with significant moral consequences. Given their traditional association with manual proficiencies, skills are apt to be considered value neutral attributes (Barrow, 1987). Following this perception, it is unlikely that schools will be viewed as indoctrinating students with particular ideologies when teaching attitudes as skills, but merely as providing them with potentially beneficial capacities. There are obvious and important moral distinctions, however, between providing students with physical proficiency skills, and conveying to them specific attitudes and values. When attitudes are introduced to students through the formal curriculum, educational and philosophical concerns immediately arise over what, and whose, attitudes can be conveyed legitimately to students (Coombs, 1988).

Under the heading *Employability Skills*, CAPP contends that "Work experience helps students acquire the attributes that are valued in the workplace, e.g. appropriate attitudes toward

work . . ." (p.8). As part of the career preparedness section of CAPP, students are also expected to master the skills identified by ESP. In fact, these so-called skills are almost exclusively comprised of attitudes, values and dispositions, some of which have rather overt ideological overtones. Under the heading *adaptability skills*, for example, students are expected to "demonstrate a positive attitude toward change" (CBOC, 1997). Identifying "a positive attitude toward change" as a skill involves at least two fundamental errors; one conceptual and the other valuative. First, attitudes are not skills in any meaningful sense, and categorizing them as such avoids the morally obligatory process of providing sound arguments for their inclusion in curriculum. Secondly, there is nothing inherently positive, or for that matter negative, in the concept of change. Individual or group reaction to a particular change hinges on the context and consequences of the transformation in question. Asking students to develop a positive attitude toward generalized change is arguably an ideological strategy designed to condition them to accept passively the lives of occupational instability that accompany current labour market conditions.

Following Coombs, then, there are limited kinds of attitudes whose inclusion in curriculum can be morally justified: 1) attitudes that are necessary components of acquiring knowledge and understanding; and 2) attitudes that are implicit in the fundamental principles and institutions of our liberal democratic society, i.e., regarding all persons as equally deserving of respect, autonomy and opportunity. The first group of attitudes is termed epistemic since they provide essential dispositions for acquiring knowledge such as normative expectations on standards of accuracy and adequacy that the procedures and products of intellectual inquiry must satisfy. The second category is potentially more contentious because it involves imparting certain ethical beliefs to students, but Coombs wisely restricts these attitudes to those required for successful participation in a pluralistic, democratic society. Examples of ethically appropriate attitudes schools might seek to convey include respect for

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persons, their rights and property, commitment to fairness and justice, care and concern for others, concern for the environment, concern for humane treatment of animals, tolerance toward persons who are different from oneself, and respect for democratic principles and institutions. Peters (1966) echoes the belief that only certain attitudes are morally appropriate for school instruction, arguing that a teacher is not "employed as a missionary for any church or as a recruiting officer for any political party" (p.203). The only morally acceptable attitudes to convey through public education, then, are arguably those necessary for critical reflection, the procurement of knowledge, and intelligent participation in democratic citizenship.

In this paper I have provided a brief analysis of the category mistakes that occur in the employability skills discourse promoted by CAPP. Many of these conceptual errors follow from the metaphysical distinction between mind and body, and the resulting improper placing of concepts describing mental processes in the same logical category as those denoting physical ones. Further, I have highlighted the important moral reasons why attitudes shoul I not be classified as skills, and suggested the limited kinds of attitudes ethically appropriate for public education conveyance. I have demonstrated how employability skills programs such as CAPP commit both types of conceptual errors with potentially negative pedagogical and moral consequences. Only by correctly identifying, and fully understanding, the actual nature of the concepts included in employability skills discourse can educators properly evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness and moral appropriateness of programs such as CAPP.

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